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Saving the girl: A creative reading of Alice Sebold's *Lucky* and *The Lovely Bones*

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Abstract

In the late 1990s, Alice Sebold is writing what will become her phenomenally successful novel *The Lovely Bones* (2002), but she finds herself having to abandon it in order to write her critically acclaimed rape memoir *Lucky* (1999). She did not want, she says years later, Susie Salmon (the novel's dead narrator) doing "work for her", but wanted Susie free "to tell her own story". *Lucky* would be the "real deal" about rape, while *The Lovely Bones* would be a fantasy. And yet, the memoir and novel are similar in many respects; and nearly identical to begin with. *The Lovely Bones* opens with the rape, murder and mutilation of a young girl – Susie – while *Lucky* opens with reference to the girl who was raped, murdered and mutilated in the tunnel Sebold was also raped in. This girl, Sebold maintains, always haunts her. Thus, I will argue, it is not possible to read her novel, which some critics have dismissed as "timid and sentimental", without reading her gritty autobiography; and vice versa it is not possible to read Sebold's rape memoir without reading her novel, which in a complex way bears witness to that unnamed girl, if not for all dead, unnamed girls. The question is, then, how does the intertextuality of Sebold's novel and memoir, and, more broadly, the interrelationship of truth and fantasy, impact on our reading of Sebold's work, especially her memoir?

Keywords

Rape, fact, fiction, truth, lie, reading, writing, creative witnessing, wishful thinking, utopia

> The story – even if it's a lie or a clever trickster tale – is what produces the truth. And whatever intelligent scholars think these days about the nature of truth, I've never encountered one who didn't strive to achieve it, whatever her or his version of it was.
>
> Avery Gordon (2004) 'Some thoughts on the utopian'

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The second I send the abstract I worry that it's not right.

I was convinced when writing it that yes I had something important, new and interesting to say about the interplay of fact and fiction. That I had insights to offer which seemed a logical consequence of decades of poststructuralist thinking.

More than that: I was convinced the would-be paper was going to provoke controversy. With a chance it would change the way we read personal testimony – an altogether new way of reading.

And why not: stupid to feign modesty when I've a will to rewrite *Lucky* – for there to be no rape, no pain, no fallout; for there to be greater hope, happiness and love in the world. Wishful thinking? Maybe. But not mine alone. The desire for a different story is shared. What's the point if not?

Now having submitted it, every word seems a lie.

For while it might be true that Sebold wrote *Lucky* in the hope, she says, that "somehow [her] writing would take away a little bit of the taboo or the weirdness of using that word [rape]" and that it would "make it easier to bring up rape in conversation", it was not, as might be thought, her first attempt to write about the rape. There were the journals written throughout her college years and early attempts to write creatively about it: a poem remembered as "awful" and hopelessly long, with rape nothing more than "a muddled metaphor"; and another giving voice to her rage, a shockingly brutal revenge fantasy. There was a piece for *The New York Times Magazine*, quoted, it is later discovered, in Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*; and an appearance on *Oprah*.

There were rejected novels also, and, strictly speaking, Sebold abandoned writing a novel entitled *Monsters* to write *Lucky*, a version of which would eventually become *The Lovely Bones*.

The writing of *The Lovely Bones* is not – and never was – simply usurped by Sebold's need to write *Lucky*, as if there is a singular urgency to life-writing. As if fiction, and what it offers, is any less urgent. As if one fiction is enough.

It's a set-up, in other words. Sebold knows it's impossible to neatly divide our writing and our worlds, to separate the "real deal" from the fantasies that sustain us, for better and for worse.

And, finally, Sebold is not haunted by the girl who was murdered and dismembered in the tunnel she was raped in. Sebold does think about her, it's true. But it's a stretch to claim Sebold is haunted by the memory of that girl. That Sebold "will think of a girl in the last moments of her life" whenever she *thinks* of the pink hair tie she spotted, among the leaves and glass carpeting the tunnel, while she was raped, *is* not the language of haunting. "There are some things you never get over," says Sebold's wise old soldier friend when years later Sebold repeats her story to him, which includes, by then, a second rape. The unnamed girl is not among them.

You don't have to read one book to read the other; and there is no need to argue this or that: to ask or conclude anything. Sebold was raped; she wrote her story. Some performance if I'm not to look a fool repeating that for fifteen minutes.

*

Conference paper title: ''Reading Rape Memoir and Literature: The Case for Feminist Fictocriticism''

The title is already a tweaked version of the one I submitted for the conference but no-one checks these things. I continue with the funding application.

Conference details: '''Witness Literature'; Australian Feminist Studies Association Bi-annual Conference, November 26–29, 2016, Sydney University''

Applicant name & School: ''Dr Jane Kilby, Arts and Media''

Match funding request (subject to approval of Business Expenses Claim): ''£954.07''

Case for support:

''The AFSA conference is a significant networking opportunity for gender and women's studies researchers,'' I write, slowing to get the pitch right, ''and the 10th Biennial will draw an international field of scholars addressing the range and forms of witness testimony and art. More particularly – and highlighted in the call for papers – is a demand for interdisciplinary, trans-textual scholarship, and creative methodologies, which will place the conference at the forefront of contemporary debates over the future of reading (Marcus and Best, 2009); critique (Felski, 2015); and academic writing (Bammer and Boetcher-Joeres, 2015; Stacey and Wolff, 2013).

''My presentation speaks directly to this request for work on witness literature and for formal innovation. In a unique departure from scholarly convention,'' I continue, now enjoying the hyperbole demanded by funding applications, ''my paper offers a radically new model of reading, which in practice manifests as a seamless weave of analysis, autobiography, *and fiction*. As my title makes clear, I will tag this as 'fictocriticism'; and will use social media to promote it as a distinctly experimental method for reading texts. In so doing the paper (and publicity) will serve two inter-related aims: 1) to do justice to the experience of rape (and violence more generally); and 2) to provoke debate over the nature and value of knowledge production in a 'post-truth' world.''

Outputs:

''I will submit a revised version of the conference paper to *New Feminist Studies* (Impact Factor: 1.114/Ranking: Women's Studies #18 out of 41) in Spring 2017, with a view to securing a 4* REF submission for REF2021. *New Feminist Studies* is a prestigious US journal and is the logical target journal given the popularity of Sebold's work in North America.

''I hope also to build on the success of a prior AHRC network grant application with a bid to their 'Follow-on scheme'. Provisionally entitled 'Textual Activism/ Active Testimony: The Future of Academic Feminism', the network will work as an international, cross-disciplinary forum for developing new ways of doing politics and theory.

''Both outputs will help the University achieve its KPIs for research publications and grant capture; and are in keeping with the University's commitment to 'blue-skies thinking', and the School's 'teaching-led research' strategy.''

II

'It's the worst rape scene I've ever read,' says David.

It's Week 5 of Twenty-first Century Women's Writing, a module I inherited when I moved to English and Creative Writing from Sociology and Criminology. Toni Morrison's *Love* was my predecessor's choice, one I was happy with. Ditto Pat Baker's *Double Vision*. The rest I changed; as I did the module title: ''writing'' instead of ''fiction,'' otherwise Jeanette Winterson's memoir would have looked odd on the reading list. Sebold's texts were new though. I had an idea that teaching *Lucky* and *The Lovely Bones* would help with writing the conference paper.

'The worst rape scene?' I question David. 'But it's beautifully written; the way Morrison slips us into the scene: our eyes bound to it as surely as the victim is. The surprise slide of her sentences: the jarring shift in tone.'

I pick up my copy of *Love*, determined to prove my point.

'"Maybe,"' I read out loud, '"his girlish tears were worse than the reason he shed them. Maybe they were a weakness the others recognised and pinpointed even before he punked out. Even before the melt had flooded his chest when he saw her hands, curving down the snow white shoelaces that bound them. They might have been mittens pinned crookedly on a clothesline, hung there by some slut who didn't care what the neighbors said. And the plum polish in nails bitten to the quick gave the mitten-tiny hands a womanly look and made Romen think she herself was the slut – the one with no regard for what people might think."'

'See,' I say, looking up. 'The way she captures his fraught ambivalence, the twisted logic: a slut with child's hands; her agency at once suspended and suspect; split according to his torn desires: rape or rescue. No better writing.' I could go on.

'Yes. No,' objects David. 'It's brilliant; I'm going to read more Morrison now. But I meant the hardest rape scene I've read. The most harrowing.' There is a murmur of consensus among the students.

This is nothing.

'Yeah, I know what you meant. His excitement. The turn-taking. The high-fives. Her distressed mewing as Morrison puts it, then the silence. But it ends well. He saves the girl. Well, sort of.'

'Sort of?' queries Yellow, reaching for her bottle of Oasis having just polished off a large packet of Doritos. 'Dunno what you mean.'

'Read the bit where Romen steps forward to take his turn. Third paragraph. Closely. All of you.' Heads bow.

''Romen stepped forward to take Theo's place,'' they read quietly, attentively, ''then watched in wonder as his hands moved to the headboard. The knot binding her right wrist came undone as soon as he touched it and her hand fell over the bedside. She did not use it at all – not to hit or scratch or push back her hair. Romen untied the other hand still hanging from the Pro Ked laces.''

'It's not him who unties her?' offers Yellow.

'That's right. Not to begin with. His hands appear to be working separately, not against his will as such, but with a force not quite his own. Almost magically.'

'But why?'

'You mean why doesn't Morrison simply write: Romen stepped forward to take Theo's place but then ashamed at being in a line-up of rapists, stops and releases her.'

'Yeah, something like that.'

'Well, in part, it's because Morrison offers us complex, authentic characters. To be real, Romen cannot easily escape the misogyny of his culture. That's why he is turned on to begin with. So he needs a helping hand.'

'So it's L helping him do the right thing?' suggests David.

'Yeah. Although L is a complicated figure for love, not least because she is both dead and a figure for Morrison. Like a lot of good writers, especially when dealing with violence, Morrison is reflecting on the role of literature in the world and her place in it, from within the novel itself.' I'd said the same about Pat Barker's *Double Vision* the week before, but obviously they'd not made the connection.

'But still,' insists Yellow, ignoring that I've packed quite a lot into my answer. 'I don't like how Romen says he would've strangled her if she'd bothered to thank him.'

'I know what you mean. But she doesn't thank him, or say or do anything in fact, at any point. The rape is a plot device. In the end, it's Morrison's way of saving Romen from the violence the rape would do to him, of setting him on a different path. The girl is irrelevant.'

'That's rubbish,' says Yellow: 'she should have a voice.'

If only it were so simple.

*

What is *Love* about, I ask, looking up at the students as they sit above me in the large tiered lecture theatre, pens and fingers poised to make notes, with strict instruction to read pages 47–49 and the final chapter for Thursday's seminar ringing in their ears. I start to answer with reference to Morrison's new Foreword to the 2005 edition of the novel in which she remembers a childhood friend as someone who laughed and played just like she had, but who nonetheless "floated behind a scrim" with "eyes full of distance" and "a smile made attractive by what it withheld; some knowingness it appeared unwilling to share. Something treasured had been irretrievably lost and there was nothing to be done about it."

And when Morrison learns, later, what separated her friend from "us (from the world, perhaps)," I explain to the students, Morrison "became afraid of wakefulness as well as sleep. Trying to picture the acts foisted on her by her father was impossible – out of range. Nothing came clearly into view. They were literally unimaginable."

Love, I insist, is first and foremost about the difficulty of imagining and speaking about incest and more broadly rape and sexual abuse, of bringing it into discourse. At key points throughout the novel, the victims are figured speechless: the girl saved by Morrison's protagonist Romen is mute following her ordeal. The college woman raped by a Black Panther Brother speaks out but is ignored: 'she asked for

it' is once more the story. Junior keeps counsel about her experience of abuse at the correctional home. And Heed and Christine cannot speak to each other about Christine's grandfather.

It is a novel about silence, I offer. The way silence condemns – negates – the speaking self. Yes, but also silence as sanctuary: a place of safe retreat; and a means of punishing others. And more complexly silence as a positive power. The power of silent rebuke and reproach: of the space opened when words are withheld. The pull of silence; of not putting into words what can be uttered: spelt out. The power of the said unsaid. As L – the dead narrator – puts it, we've "*forgotten the beauty of meaning much by saying little*."

And yet, I go on, looking to complicate their reading of the novel yet further, Morrison admits by virtue of her description that she knew the friend was hiding something which could possibly have been shared; a knowledge she only *appeared* unwilling to speak about. Indeed, she concludes that even if her friend "had used her tongue and spoken" – had braved speech – to whom would she have turned, when even her friends, Morrison included, were hardly prepared to listen.

The question, then, I say, is whether *Love* is committed to there being things that are *literally* unimaginable, such that we remain forever lost for words; or whether it is a working through of the author's failure to meet the demand for listening, of her guilt? Does *Love* ask us, in other words, to hear now what was once beyond imagination; or does it absolve us since it is never possible to hear or otherwise name what is impossible to imagine, and is regardless an act that cannot be undone?

I sense the need to put it simply: OK, I say, put bluntly, is it an excuse? Is it an excuse to say you did nothing about another's pain – and can never remedy that failing – because it is unimaginable?

I didn't have the answer, though; whatever the students might have thought as they looked down at me that day. That is why I teach; and it was why I'd moved across to English. *I* needed an answer to that question, one rooted in a love of language, in its practice and power; not an answer in theory.

I spent the rest of the lecture exploring the storyline, rehearsing the various readings of *Love* and pointing out the formal qualities of the novel.

*

'OK, now turn to page 188,' I say to the students as I put away my phone and they settle back down following a short break. 'Remember Tuesday's lecture. Yes. Heed and Christine were the best of friends. They loved each other exclusively as children and would spend long summer days on the beach talking to each other in their secret language "idagay." Until, that is, the day Christine witnesses her grandfather masturbating in her bedroom, having, unbeknown to her, taken prior pleasure in touching Heed's nine-year-old body. The girls do not – cannot – speak again to each other with any measure of love, for seventy years or more. Why?'

'That's one of your rhetorical questions, init?' states Yellow. 'It's just a secret code: me and my sister had one.'

'OK,' I say, 'so why do we learn that Christine called Heed a slave in idagay when they were young? The fact of which really hurt her.'

I've lost Yellow.

'Anyone?' I ask. Nothing.

'OK, we know that Heed cannot speak to Christine about Cosey touching her; and Christine cannot speak to Heed about seeing her grandfather masturbate in her bedroom.'

'Do you have to keep saying that?' complains Chloe.

'Sorry. But c'mon people. You were asked to read this chapter for today's seminar.'

Yellow: 'Is it that they can talk about slavery but not about sexual abuse?'

'Thank you, Yellow. For Morrison the shame of slavery is not the same as the shame of sexual violation, is not something they can share. As she puts it,' I say, again picking up my copy of the novel, '"[T]his particular shame was different and could not tolerate speech – not even in the language they had invented for secrets."' Sexual victimisation is unspeakable, so the burden is born by each alone; slavery is not, and her novel is, in part, testimony to the black communities that did flourish in the decades just before the rise of the civil rights movement.'

'Ah but,' Yellow counters, 'they do share the secret at the end.'

'Actually, no, if you look carefully at their final dialogue, it's unmarked, suggesting it is imagined. Remember the chapter is called Phantom, the only chapter title that does not clearly reference Bill Cosey, Christine's grandfather. They're reunited, yes, and talking, but with Heed already, it seems, dead in the arms of Christine: their secret has gone to the grave. It's a phantom conversation, and Christine's desperate attempts to save Heed and their friendship are too late; as are Romen's when he also arrives on the scene. This is Morrison's guilt: her shame, I guess, for not saving her childhood friend from being locked in a world of silence. She'll not allow herself forgiveness; self-love, you might say; and she'll not abuse her magic. Not quite, anyhow.'

'Oh,' says Yellow.

Many weeks later I curse my mistake. Yellow was right: they did share their secret. I now had my answer. It is simple.

III

> We read in the vain, impossibly stupid hope that reading will spark a revolution, if not in us then in those in whom we invest our reading and our politics: our students.
>
> Jane Kilby and Antony Rowland (2014) *The Future of Testimony*

With the prospect of teaching *Lucky* looming, I near wish I'd not responded to the call for papers, near wish I'd not got funding to go to Australia; and, with almost greater regret, near wish I'd not let Antony persuade me to speak about Sebold at

our concluding AHRC event, held despite the riots sweeping the UK that particular summer. The Sydney conference would not be first time I'd spoken about *Lucky*.

Tucked away in a laptop folder was, in fact, a polished paper on Sebold's memoir, inspired by Rachel, a joint English and Sociology student, who I'd got to know when she'd taken my second-year Criminology option on women, violence and victimisation. She'd asked whether I would supervise her final semester dissertation. She wanted to write about Sebold's memoir. I agreed and read *Lucky*, a copy of which had sat on my bookshelf for years, its faded ''Buy One, Get One Half Price'' sticker proof of the success of *The Lovely Bones* and, if it's a claim you want to make, evidence that *Lucky* is the most widely read rape memoir there is.

But Rachel had struggled; and I'd struggled to help her. *Lucky* is not a sophisticated text, no matter how you approach it. You can point up the formal significance of Sebold's decision to open the memoir with an extended account of the rape she experienced the last night of her freshman year at Syracuse University (by making it the start of the story for both, author and reader are aligned); and you can point to the plotting of its reveal (the second rape is recounted in the last numbered chapter of the memoir: Chapter Thirteen. The next 'chapter' is the memoir's concluding 'Aftermath,' and is a condensed account of the many years it takes Sebold to recover from the horror of both rapes. Strictly speaking, the second rape is the end of the story – not the 'happily philosophical' ending in which Sebold recounts having sex as if for the first time, and with it the insight that it is possible to hold both hell and heaven in your hands at once: for impossible truths to co-exist). But that is about as 'complicated' as it gets.

The fact that I'd never again be able to read through to the end of the first chapter, to relive the scene where, at the hospital, having endured the police-medical examination, Sebold stands in a scalding hot shower, raw with the frenzy of trying to scrub herself clean of the rape, was of no help to Rachel.

The English co-supervisor took up the reins, advising Rachel to 'read some theory' and to add Joyce Carol Oates' *Rape: A Love Story* to her reading of *Lucky*. At the time I did not understand her advice.

Writing 'The Future of Testimony' paper proved surprisingly easy, however. The lack of secondary literature was liberating and our conference was an invitation to go beyond the well-worn critiques of 'misery memoirs.' ''With all things possible: Alice Sebold's *Lucky*'' was the title, and I opened with a simple question: ''why do we read testimony; and more pointedly, how, when it is not written for us''; and then a simple statement of the problem: ''I'm a feminist reader, but *Lucky* is not written for me; in fact, of all those who try to help her in the aftermath of her rape, it is Tricia, the Rape Crisis representative, who is given the poorest press, condemned by Sebold both for her 'sort of comforting ''I'm here for you'' stance,' and her use of generalities. 'I did not want to be one of a group or compared with others,' Sebold writes. 'It somehow blindsided my sense that I was going to survive. Tricia prepared me for failure by saying that it would be okay if I failed. She did this by showing me that the odds out there were against me. But what she told me, I didn't want to hear. In the face of

dismal statistics regarding arrest, prosecution, and even full recovery for the victim, I saw no choice but to ignore the statistics.'

''Tricia,'' I argued that summer, ''reads Sebold wrong, presuming that Sebold would want to know the chances of catching her assailant, of securing a conviction, and of making a complete recovery; presuming also that she'd want to know that there are other rape victims, with similar stories. Worse, she sets Sebold up to fail, scuppering her instinct for survival. Tricia failed, in other words, to affirm that there is always hope, despite statistics that tell us otherwise and structures that oppress us.''

Did I look up happy with my argument? Self-assured? All I remembered was being glad Antony and I had known to put the rape narrative panel in a seminar room and grateful to the few who made it seem full. It was never going to compete with the Adorno and aesthetics panel.

''And yet it is not possible to read *Lucky* without acknowledging with Sebold how common and devastating rape is. A week after her rape, Sebold accompanies her parents to pick up her sister from another university: graffiti mocks the gang-rape of a girl at a fraternity party. Back at home, Sebold learns that the mother of one of her old school friends had spoken, for the very first time, of her own experience of being raped as a young woman. The next autumn, Sebold is privy to the story of one of her class-mates, Maria Flores, who had been raped throughout her childhood by her father and brothers. Sebold, it is also guessed, is not her rapist's first victim, as statistics generally confirm. And years later, when she is a teaching assistant at a New York college Sebold listens as her students recount experiences of rape and sexual abuse. Her article in *The New York Times Magazine* solicits mail from other victims, and on *Oprah* she speaks alongside Michelle – a victim who had not fought back, but who, Sebold reckoned, did not go 'back home to snort heroin.'

''And, then, of course, there's Lila's story.''

Fifteen minutes later, having butchered a good chunk of words, I finished my paper with what would have seemed at the time a confident summing up:

''Reading rape testimony requires an ethics and a politics. Tricia does not hear Sebold, unlike Sebold's beloved poetry teacher Tess Gallagher, who, according to Sebold, 'listened for the pain in [her] words, not to the narrative itself,' and who 'intuited' and reflected back what was important to Sebold 'from the confused mass of experience and yearning' that was, then, her story.

''And yet Tess is not required to listen repeatedly to women's experiences of rape and sexual abuse, such that they make for a generally known story, a collective narrative requiring a different response. Tricia is duty bound to listen ahead, and cannot hear Sebold as Tess does in the moment.

''But, then, neither Tricia nor Tess are required to question Sebold's story; interrogate it as her trusted lawyer Gail was required to in order that she might prepare her for – and defend her in – court, which at best is a gruelling experience for victims; and at worst a repeat violation. (Sebold did win. Eventually. But justice as such is rarely, if ever, experienced as a victory.).

"To read *Lucky* is to read in the company of Tess, Tricia and Gail: it is to read ethically with the sensitivity of a poet, to read politically with the agenda of an activist and to read critically with the rigour of a legal advocate. The trick is how, if not, as I've attempted here, without some imagination."

Antony was less persuasive, however, when he insisted I include the paper in the conference collection.

IV

Happy is a gift. Smart, playful; perfect for students and critics alike – this week's teaching is going to be a doddle.

'Winterson's account of attempted suicide,' I taunt the class, smiling at Yellow. She'd written a great essay on Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and was already planning her answer to the Sebold question, for which, I would learn at graduation, she'd get her highest mark.

'C'mon. A picture-book cottage nestled in deep countryside. Poison. A cat bringing her back to life from the brink of death. A little fishy don't you think?'

The students are upset with me.

Yes, yes, they all said at the start of the seminar. Winterson is right: "experience *and* experiment". "The observed and the imagined". Life is "part fact, part fiction". "Always a cover story". We write to write our "way out" of life, as much as we write our way into it.

Yes, yes, they agreed: "When we write we offer the silence as much as the story. Words are the part of speech that can be spoken."

No, they said, they don't "remember the story of Philomela who is raped and then has her tongue ripped out by the rapist so that she can never tell". But promise to remember the myth's simple symbolism. To remember also that Winterson told only half the story. Philomela is imprisoned but she is not without power. She stitches a tapestry which tells how King Tereus took her from her father's house with assurance of safe passage and the promise of being reunited with her sister, Procne. It is a half-truth: she is raped and abandoned by the King. But when Procne receives her sister's text and learns of her husband's crime, she finds and frees Philomela. Together they exact a terribly violent revenge, and only escape death by asking the Gods to turn them into birds. They take flight as a swallow and a nightingale.

Yes, then, they said, we "are not silenced. All of us, when in deep trauma, find we hesitate, we stammer; there are long pauses in our speech. The thing is stuck. We get our language back through the language of others".

For real, though, when it came down to it, they want as nothing but fact Winterson lying unconscious in her garage in a desperate grapple with death: 'You can't say that,' they chorus. 'You can't say she made it up.'

Make-believe, not made-up, I say. And remind them that if ''life is part fact, part fiction'', then death also; and how, for Winterson, writing is as much a means of escaping life as it is a way of embracing it.

I remind them also of how quick they'd been to forgive Winterson for inventing Elsie – the larger-than-life woman who looks after the little Jeanette in *Oranges*. How they agreed she was a lonely kid and lonely kids have imaginary friends to play with. Remember, I say, Winterson is a writer and always committed to saying more than what is said. I remind them how they liked the magic realism of *Oranges*, and of *Sexing the Cherry*, which they'd read in their first year. I remind them of ''The Twelve Flying Princesses,'' of how Winterson is concerned also with rewriting fairytales and myths. Retelling the stories we tell and pass to one another and from one generation to the next, including her own story.

She's also a bit of a prat, I add.

'Yeah, but making up Elsie isn't the same,' says Yellow, who is not to be confused with one of those students novelists conjure as a foil for the protagonist of the piece.

'Why?' I ask. 'What's the difference?'

'It's fiction,' Yellow insists. 'It doesn't harm anyone. But you can't pretend something has happened, when it hasn't. Not when people think you're writing your own story.'

'I thought that bit of *Oranges* was her story,' I say. 'I was upset when I found out Elsie wasn't real. It meant Winterson was a truly lonely kid. It's just her suicide attempt doesn't seem right.'

'You can't say that.'

'Why? Really, I'm not messing,' I say. 'It'd be a good thing, wouldn't it, if Winterson had made it up?'

'No way,' objects Yellow. 'She can't do that. Not about suicide. It's wrong.'

'Because it's sacred?' I suggest. 'Like you can't pretend to be a Holocaust survivor?'

'Someone has pretended to be a Holocaust survivor?' demands Sarah.

'Yes,' I say. 'There was a really famous case about ten years ago. Someone called Benjamin Wilkomirski wrote a Holocaust memoir called *Fragments*, but it turned out to be a fake.'

'Oh my God. That's awful. It's like stealing someone's identity. Their life.'

I could but decide not to say if I were a Holocaust survivor I wouldn't mind swapping my life with the one Wilkomirski had, which while bad during the war would have been better. They're agitated enough.

'Yeah,' says Yellow. 'It's like when women lie about being raped. It gives real victims a bad name.'

'Maybe,' I say conscious of the many Yellows in the world. 'But (a) most women tell the truth but still are not believed; (b) men lie all the time and get away with it; and (c) wouldn't it better if every rape claim were an outrageous lie.'

The students are no longer upset with me. I'm talking nonsense: what kind of world, they say, would we be living in if every rape was a made-up story.

OK, I confess, I say, I sobbed when I found Winterson slumped beside her car, struggling to cling to life.

V

The first attempt at writing the Sydney conference paper starts personal. I scrapped it. No-one wants to read about my fraught relationship with language. There's enough said about that already.

The second attempt is better though: it begins with a short story about a student who works as a volunteer for Rape Crisis and is planning to write her final assignment on *Lucky* and *The Lovely Bones* – although she's not sure what is meant by an 'inter-textual' reading. It has OK scene setting (''It had felt like an achievement moving to the Pankhurst Centre, like they'd finally arrived. Tracey got a thrill out of it every week, walking around the museum before her shift started: seeing the banners and photographs; it helped her cope. Maybe one day rape will be history with volunteers like her a thing of the past, like the Suffragettes.''); and some nice detail about the reality of working helplines (''She lets the phone ring another couple times. She's been trained not to answer too quickly and to steady herself as she reaches forward to pick it up in case it turns out to be a prank caller, a crank or pervert. That had shocked her when she did the training last summer. How could anyone do that? Tracey was glad that she volunteered when she had. They get less crap calls now they only operate the line late during the week. The Samaritans, she'd heard from a friend, got it worse with men using it as a free sex-line Friday and Saturday nights. They have to be polite. You aren't allowed to put the phone down. Could be a presenting problem the trainer had said.''); and, of course, it's creative writing after all, witty flourish (''Bollocks to that,' Tracey had whispered to the volunteer sitting next to her: 'I'll cut them off.'').

It's not clear why I abandoned this attempt, but with the introduction of the second character I suspect I dismissed it as indulgent (''Lucy stares at the screen. Manchester Rape Crisis: Listening. Believing. Supporting. The logo is purple and green. She resists opening the Information link. To scroll through: Myths and Facts. Short and Long Term Effects. Reasons For and Advice on Self-Injury. Ritual Abuse. Flashbacks. The lack of logic annoys her – why separate tabs for self-injury and flashbacks, and isn't all abuse ritual; and why aren't anger and rage long-term effects? She worries also that the stats are out of date. The myths are fine. She dials again. The phone rings. She waits that bit longer with every attempt. Daring herself to stay on the line. This time. She hears hope. 'Hello, my name is Tracey. This is Manchester Rape Crisis. I'm here to listen.'').

The third attempt begins with a general questioning of what happens when you read a memoir and some aspect of it does not ring true. It quickly peters out: I obviously had no answer to that particular question.

The fourth 'attempt' is a document entitled ''With every false start a new reading,'' but on opening it's blank.

I start again, sticking more closely this time to Sebold's words and her reasons for writing.

VI

> All writing is the writing of the already-said.
> Michael Worton and Judith Still (1990) 'Intertextuality'

'OK. We're off. Get your things,' I say as I start to herd the students out of the lecture theatre. I'd emailed them after the class on *Happy* giving notice to read *Lucky*, pack some summer gear and bring provisions the following week. They'd arrived game for my antics.

'Not the Southern Cemetery again,' queries Leigh.

'I'll never forget that visit,' says Gemma falling in alongside me. 'That poor girl. How could anyone vandalise her grave. And them unmarked graves. It was so sad.'

'Yeah, and the guy from Coronation Street who found that body. How bad was that?' says Zoe.

I apologise to the memory of Lesley Ann Downey, Vera Millward and Jean Jordan, and Edward Evans who everyone forgets, and have the students follow me out of the building. I'm done with taking students on trips.

'So where are we going?' asks Yellow, looking, as she always does, a perfect sight.

'New York State.'

'Hooray!' says Olivia: 'I've always wanted to go to New York.'

I wait to correct her.

*

At JFK, as I lead them through to the domestic flights lounge, I'm forced, having dodged their questions since leaving Salford, to admit: 'New York *State*. I said New York *State*. We're flying on to Syracuse.'

Yellow is quick: 'That's where Alice Sebold went to university.'

'Yeah,' I say. 'I thought it would be good idea to visit the scene of the crime, so to speak.'

'That's mad. Real crazy,' she says, speaking, for once, for everyone.

'Not as half as weird as it's going to get,' I mutter. Adding, to ward off any more questions: 'We've a long wait for our next flight, anyone for a drink?'

All roar yes.

I'm heady with the power; what you can do with an asterisk and a few lines of prose.

*

It's a warm evening. The students shed their jackets as they walk through the park, a short distance from the university. They're surprised how light it is. The grass

is greener than they'd imagined for the time of year, and the people around are a puzzle. 'No phones,' says Charlie. 'What are they wearing?' is Yellow's outrage.

'One rule only,' I say, ignoring the need for explanation. 'You cannot say, or do, anything. No matter what you feel, how great the need to intervene.'

I give Yellow the "I'm keeping an eye on you" gesture and her friends laugh. 'What?' she starts to protest: 'Why me? You're always picking on me. I . . .'

I hug her to shut her up, and lead the students up the slope to the top of what was once an amphitheatre. There is a tunnel opening down at our right.

I see Madison before spotting Sebold. The students see nothing. It takes a while. Then they see a woman as she is grabbed by a young black man, watch as she wrestles free, makes a run for it, is caught again and knocked to the ground. There is a struggle. Kicking. Another attempt to run away. He pulls her back by her hair. But still she fights. They fall once more. He pummels her with his fists. Punch after punch. Turns her over and strangles her. The alarm is immediate but the distance too great to hear his threat to kill her. He has a knife.

Everything slows down. He stands up and drags her across the grass toward us. She twists and half crawls, trying to keep up with him. As they get nearer, we see her cling to the iron fence which leads to the tunnel entrance beneath us. He yanks her free and pulls her into the tunnel.

'Stand up.' I slide down the hill. The students follow and reluctantly gather at the opening. Vision is thwarted by the fading light. The threshold cannot be crossed. We can only listen.

"Take off your clothes."

"I have eight dollars in my back pocket."

"I don't want your money."

"Please don't rape me."

"Take off your clothes."

"I'm a virgin."

"Kiss me."

"Please don't. Please."

"Shut up. Kiss me, but this time kiss me back."

"Better. Now your trousers. Bra."

"Please don't do this, please."

"Lie down. Bitch."

Her strategy, we discover later, is to start combining truth and fiction:

"I'm a foster child. I've no-one who loves me."

"You're the worst I've done this to. You're dry."

"Sorry, I'm a virgin."

"Stop looking at me. Shut your eyes. Stop shaking."

"I can't."

"Stop it or you'll be sorry. Stop staring at me."

Fiction and truth.

"You're strong. Real. Powerful."

"Raise your legs. Spread them."

People laughing in the park turn and shout when they hear a woman's muffled scream. ''Go for it girl!''

''Stand-up. Put on your panties. Give me a blow job.''

''I don't know how.''

''Put it in your mouth and suck.''

''Shit. Not like that. On the ground. Flat. Do as I say.''

Boys and girls. Pass along. Again. ''Nail her, all right!''

''You're such a man. Thank you, thank you, I wanted this.''

Truth and fiction.

''I'm so sorry. You're a good girl. I'm so sorry.''

''Can I get dressed?''

''Of course, of course. I'll help.''

''Thank you. Can I go now? It's okay. Really. I forgive you.''

''Which way you going?''

Sebold points left.

''All right. Take care of yourself.''

''Yes. Promise.''

''Hey girl!'' he yells as she walks away.

She turns.

''What's your name?''

''Alice.''

''Nice knowing you, Alice. See you around sometime.''

Yellow closest to me is quiet. Pale. Something fleeting passes between us.

Rapists are not monsters, I say, offering what little insight I can. Monsters grunt and groan. Rapists talk. Some beautifully, some not; some of it makes sense, it seems, some not; some of it is repeated in some form or another, some of it is impossible to repeat. It's not about sex, I say. Some still think it is. It's a script, with men required to learn the perpetrator's part, women the victim's part. And men, says Yellow, finding her voice again. Yes, and men also, I say, holding the desire to complicate my reply.

I suggest an evening of poetry before catching the flight home. The majority of students have not read beyond the first chapter. I sympathise. Yellow looks at me. Not that poetry evening. I promise not to repeat the horror.

VII

In response to their request, I send the conference organisers a short bio, flagging up the 'larger project': 'the Aileen Wuornos book.' Self-promotion, of course, but you can't afford to miss any opportunity. I say I'm close to finishing it but only in my head; I've ridiculous ambition for what it might do.

I reread my abstract, now just nervous at the prospect of speaking. I want to say something important. New and interesting would be good, for sure, but important would do. They're not synonymous, or all together necessary.

VIII

> So, truth be told, I also wanted to give you a good story because I wanted to have and hold a good story myself.
>
> Gordon, 'Utopian'

*

'I don't remember her being here last time. THAT TIME you brought us to Syracuse,' says Leigh as Sebold walks to the front of the room. 'She looks different.'

'It's the second half,' I whisper. 'Open mic. We had to leave early during the interval to get our flight,' I say, winging it.

'Oh, yes. She looks better. Happy.'

'Yes, she is,' I say. 'It's been two and half years since she was raped. Life has moved on.'

It's Week 11. I'd nothing I could say about *The Lovely Bones*, not sensibly, not since reading Ali Smith's review of the novel for *The Guardian*, which I'd found when researching the lecture.

Her scathing critique of Sebold's novel did not bother me: she was not the only one to condemn *The Lovely Bones* as comfort reading for post 9-11 Americans, allowing them to believe that the dead are OK, 'alive' even, in some bizarre and mawish kind of way.

And nor was she the only one to suggest that *The Lovely Bones* misrepresented the threat of sexual violence with its stereotypical villain: an outsider who is intuitively understood to be odd and by turn malevolent. Knowing who's bad and who's good in the world is never that easy. True.

The Lovely Bones is ''an unwritten novel about loneliness.'' True also (it is about Lila).

But A.M. Homes' *The End of Alice* a ''classic fictional analysis of child murder,'' to which Sebold's novel could not compare?

I googled Homes' novel and ordered a copy.

You couldn't say I was not warned: I knew the book was about two paedophiles, one an aging man imprisoned for the murder of the titular Alice, and one a college girl. That it was graphically violent. That *The New York Times* critic had condemned it is as ugly, dirty and repellent. I knew the novel was meant to soil, shame and shock the reader. I knew. You couldn't say that I was warned.

I wasn't.

Did the novel reveal the human in me as many critics reckoned? No, I raged. Did the novel make me feel and think – ''honestly'' – things I'd never thought and felt before, as Brian Masters would have me believe? No. No. No. Did the novel say something interesting and new about shame as one scholar maintained? Insensible with anger: NO.

Had I foresight, I'd not have read it.

Had I presence, I'd have taken solace in Michiko Kakutani's review for *The New York Times*. Agreed: *The End of Alice* is proof "that a woman can write as badly, violently and misogynistically as a man."

Had I intelligence, I would have had different answers to the questions posed by the novel and its advocates. Yes, it does reveal the human in us: we're weak, complicit creatures. Yes, it did make me feel and think honestly things I never thought and felt before, but not the shit Masters imagined it would (some paedophiles are harmless); and yes you can argue that *The End of Alice* says something new and interesting about shame if you adopt a highly judicious reading of it.

Had I sense I would have ignored Smith's review and got the students to read Sarah Whitney's 'Uneasy Lie the Bones,' which goes a little way to explaining why we have novels like *The End of Alice*.

I didn't.

There was no choice but to transport the students back to Syracuse.

'Thanks,' says Sebold, adjusting the mic and preparing herself to speak. 'I'd like to read a poem. It's called "In my own words". I hope you like it.'

Sebold steadies herself. Silence settles. The students are listening.

My life was over
on the other side of
understanding.
A planet different, a world
of violent crime.
I was his.

Yet he murdered me.

The urge to tell was immediate.
I was fine. Here it is.
No-one can pull back
anyone from anywhere.
You save yourself,
or remain unsaved.

And I was lucky,
they said. A girl had
been murdered
and dismembered
in the same low place,
a place where actors
burst forth once.

Mine was a good one,
a story you can't control.
I heard about myself
sometimes. My life
translated.

My life had just begun.

Sebold looks up. We all clap. She looks pleased and walks off stage, up the aisle to the row in front of us, and sits down beside a young smiling woman who looks not a little unlike her. 'That was great. Glad I made it,' the young woman says. 'I was worried you weren't coming,' says Sebold: 'It got to nearly nine.' 'Yeah, sorry, got held-up. Had to ring Marc, ask him for a lift. The street around the block from us was crazy. Five cop cars with their lights going. Policemen running all about, looking around and talking to people.' 'Oh. OK,' Sebold smiles: 'Thanks for coming though. I know you had revision to do. But I needed you here with me tonight.' 'Anything for you, Clone!'

'Really!' snorts Gemma. 'I don't get it. Why are we here?'

'Thats Lila,' says Yellow. 'Her best-mate. That's the point. She can't be here and at the flat at the same time. Being here tonight changes the story.'

IX

'You didn't save Sebold, though,' complains the woman sitting at the front of the nicely air-conditioned lecture theatre. I'd chatted to her the night before at the conference reception; reckoned I could just make out the Opera House. She'd agreed there was a good view from the rooftop terrace.

'That's debatable,' I say. 'If you remember, Lila is raped at nine o'clock in the evening by a man who broke into the flat she shared with Sebold, when Sebold is miles away enjoying an evening of poetry; raped more precisely, according to the rapist's demands, in Sebold's room, on her bed, leaving the police to speculate it is a revenge-rape orchestrated from prison by Madison. Sebold dismisses this as far-fetched, but needless to say she is absolutely devastated, as the horror of Lila's rape reveals the horror of her own. She'd had nightmares, but never this. She could no more save Lila from rape than she could save herself, and could no longer claim she "got off scot-free".

'And worse, perhaps, their friendship is utterly destroyed by the rape: Lila cannot cope being around Sebold. Sebold had been a model victim – she fought back; helped secure the capture and conviction of her assailant; insisted on speaking out; and got on with her life as it had been: she was, in her own words, a "pro".

'Lila, on the other hand, did not struggle or scream when raped, could not identify her attacker and did not want to press charges. Nor did she want to speak of her experience, not even to Sebold. She turned her back on the life she'd made for herself and the love she'd known.

'Their story ends a couple of months later when Sebold and Lila are standing in a shopping mall a week before their graduation. Sebold is desperate for them to be close again, but Lila insists she wants to move on. ''We were clones,'' Sebold says. ''That was just something we said,'' Lila replies. They never see each other again.

'The fact that Sebold would claim that she ''felt'' at exactly 8.56pm Lila being raped, prompting her to quickly leave the poetry evening and to dash back to the flat meant nothing to Lila.

'In saving Lila, I save Sebold from wishing that she'd been raped instead, from lamenting the fact she had asked Lila to be a friend in the first place.

'I save Lila and I save Sebold from the sheer pain of her own rape; of feeling there is no escape, with rape all there is in the world for women.

'Save Lila and they get always to lark around, play dress-up, giggle, share a home and call each other ''Clone.''

'That's ridiculous,' says the sexual violence advice worker who'd been speaking on a previous panel with some Australian researchers doing a big impact project.

'You've changed the story. That's all.' 'It's nothing but words. Typical academic rubbish.'

'Possibly,' I reply, 'but Tricia, the Rape Crisis Representative, our nominal feminist, does read Sebold wrong. Sebold didn't want – or need – Tricia to map out the reality ahead, but rather she wanted, needed, an unlikely story of survival and justice: a vision of a world in which anything can happen, no matter how impossible. She needed Tricia to – if not exactly lie – tell it otherwise.'

'Absurd. Dangerous nonsense. You're worse than a fool.'

'Well, maybe,' I say. 'For Lila, in the end, being clones was just something they said. But for Sebold, what is said is not so simple. Words and language have power.

'At the behest of her poetry teacher, she writes a poem, ''If They Caught You'', which charts her desire to inflict all manner of violence on the yet unnamed rapist and ends with her yearning for him to come back and die beside her. Within a week, Sebold runs into him, enabling his arrest. The poem was all too prescient. ''I had issued an invitation'', Sebold writes, and reality answered.

'She decides to play fashion photographer, with Lila her subject, made to dress up and wear dark eye make-up and horrible dark red lipstick. Sebold takes pictures of her around the flat in a range of dramatic poses. Her favourite is of Lila crawling on her hands and knees, blinded without her glasses, down the hall outside her bedroom. The next line of *Lucky* is the start of the chapter detailing Lila's rape, which concludes with Lila, hands tied and blindfolded, groping her way through the flat in search of help.

'And, of course, Sebold believes in the power of calling each other Clone, which is sealed when Lila is raped. ''Now we really are clones'', Sebold said when, having finally arrived back at the flat, she sees Lila, wearing her bathrobe, being escorted away by the police.

'She tries desperately also to reclaim Lila by giving her a book of Gallagher's poems, the uncannily named *Instructions to the Double*, in which she'd written

something ''sappy'' and ''straight from [her] heart'', about how she would ''always be there for her, all she had to do was call''. *Lucky* is clearly a second attempt to reach Lila. And *The Lovely Bones* surely her third.

'Sebold survives being raped by reciting poetry; the words, she says were waiting for her. They have ontology, and she clings to them with all her life.

'And finally, when the rapist called after Sebold asking her name and she turned, unable at that particular moment to lie, answering Alice, it made her forever captive: ''I was'' she writes, ''*as I am in these pages*, his''.

'The story must read differently.'

'Rubbish. Words and books don't have that kind of power. And it was a lucky break catching Madison, and nothing but cruel coincidence when Lila was raped. The fact that Madison was black would just as well have guaranteed his arrest and conviction. And at least one woman would've been raped the night Sebold was listening to poetry. Admittedly, the odds of it being Lila would've been slim. Sebold and Lila were unlucky on that count. Your paper doesn't change the facts; doesn't change the rape of Lila. The end of her love for Sebold. It's no more than creative writing. You can't say anyone was saved by your reading. Can you?'

I rise to the challenge. And, having given it considerable thought, answer: 'Yes and no.'

'Any other questions?' cuts in the Chair. 'We're almost out of time.'

X

Accept is the recommendation of both readers, although the editors question the lack of proper referencing, and ask whether I might at least give the full name and date of publication when first mentioning an author and a text. I concede there is some value in providing a reference list.

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